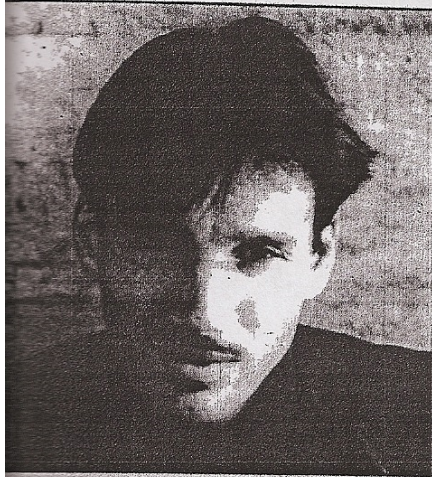


ROBERT DE ANDREIS



Columnist Robert De Andreis

airway to heaven

ROBERT DE ANDREIS

For a year, I've had a small KS lesion on the tip of my ring finger. Lately that finger has been increasingly sore and difficult to bend. But yesterday I woke up to find that overnight, the entire finger had turned purple. Yes, overnight.

I felt sick in my gut, the way you get when you are thinking about something ominous that won't go away. The sudden spread of the coma was the work of the plotting AIDS demons, trying to kick me when I'm down. I hate it when well-meaning people think they are comforting me by saying that we're all dying. We are not dying. Most people are forced to confront their mortality as the clock ticks, as the darkening skies, beneath their lives are over. There is a specific biological necrosis and unbearable emotional reality involved in lying on AIDS death row; devastating, overwhelming and tortuous. It's one of the most monumental challenges a person can ever face. I let anyone take that away from you. If you're facing a terminal illness, and will express the full spectrum of your humanity, then you deserve a gold medal in God.

Watching my finger turn purple overnight jolted me. Now more difficult for me to type, tie my shoe and do things, like the meaning of pain. It's dying human flesh, tumor flesh, that looks like the sickly finger of a corpse.

Could this be the same finger on the hand that reached in arabesque, grace as a gazelle, toward the Manhattan skyline visible

over the grand piano in the School of American Ballet's bright and airy dance studios, in Lincoln Center's Julliard Building?

Is this pained and purple finger the same one that rested gently on the barre, as I, dressed in my classic black tights and white T-shirt all those years ago, hoped one day I'd be somebody?

Why have I become someone this way, with my cult-of-the-dead status, known to you only as a dying man, while all those years when I was full of life I was stuck in the shadows? Why do I get my moment to shine now, alone on a darkened stage, under the faintest of blue lights, as a wrecking ball demolishes the theater? Because old drama queens never die, they just keep rewriting Act III.

I do believe in mind-body connections except when I can't get the principles to work for me. But there's no side-stepping heaven — peace of mind comes one step at a time. I took that finger as a two-fold sign: my health has slipped and now it's time to talk to my parents about some of the serious matters after a few months of troubling distance. Or maybe my progression of my illness has been triggered by my emotional upsets with them. It never means that something is emotionally out of align-

ment when you get sicker, although major stressors can jump-start disease progression. Either way, I knew what I had to do.

I got on the phone and invited my parents over to discuss some important issues. I was in just the exact mood to face them but I was still nervous as hell.

An hour later they arrived. Immediately my mother started prattling about anything in her immediate field of vision as she wandered around the living room, trying to take control of the conversation.

"Mother," I said in a firm voice, "sit!" Then, with my clipboard in hand, I delivered in a polite, yet business-like tone one of the hardest statements of my life, choking back tears only once.

"I'm letting you know my final plans and wishes for my later stages," I said. My mother froze and stared blankly into space the whole time. I let them know that I was to be cremated, that there would be no Catholic Mass, burial or last rites, but that I'm assembling a team that will take care of all my basic caregiving needs and I will die at home. "My home," I added.

I told my dad that the next time I share with him some critical health information I expect him to tell my siblings, that it's not his prerogative to withhold. I told them to call me at least once every three weeks to tell me they are thinking about me. I reminded my mother that I asked her to stop calling because she'd only call when she was depressed.

"I know you may get depressed when you think of me, but don't call. Wait until you are upbeat and in a good mood. Dying is painful enough for me without taking on your pain too," I said. Having them both there was helpful, since there's no telling what part of my wishes they would have omitted if one had to relay the information to the other.

I told them not to get offended if they are not invited to be around for any last-minute death-bed scenarios.

That part of my dying is insignificant to me," I said. "Those last days mean no more to me than the simplest days of my life. It'll be much easier for me to be surrounded by professional attendants who'll do their best to comfort me without all that sadness. It will be a happy time and a welcome relief. I am not going to have a big final deathbed scene with mom and dad breaking down at my bedside. I'm going to need peace and solitude on that day to fully contemplate the honorable work I did in

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this lifetime."

Whew! That was hard to say! Basically, I gave them permission to keep doing what they're doing — not to bond with me and my illness, to keep at emotional arms length, and not to counsel or support me on the most practical aspects of my impending death.

In my pride for tackling such a heavy subject with my folks, I realized later that they hadn't actually responded to any of it, supported, ac-

knowledgeed, agreed with, commended, reassured, comforted or even thanked me. But that's their job.

I'm only responsible for doing my part and yesterday I did the best job I could under the most difficult circumstances.

The next day, in a most strange but true way, the purple finger faded, the swelling had gone down and I could slip back on the only ring I've ever worn, the ring I bought when I first tested

positive, a silver Renaissance design with a green malachite stone, the stone "of becoming" that signifies eternal transformation.

Robert is in need of a professional attendant or trained volunteer assistance to volunteer two hours a week. If you are interested and qualified, send information to: 22 Clifford Terrace, #4, San Francisco, CA 94117. Serious inquiries only.